

Not So Great Expectations

Matthew 21:1-17

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.” The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became angry and said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?’” He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

Luke 19:37-44

As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.

Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”

It was a hero's welcome. When Jesus entered into Jerusalem- crowds and crowds of people were just going crazy. Some were shouting his name. Others were screaming: “Hosanna”, which means either “Save us” or “Salvation is here”. Some of them were throwing palm branches into the road- the thing you do when conquering leaders, when kings and Ceasars enter a city. And Matthew tells us some are so worked up, they tear their clothes off and hurl them out on the road- like a weird form of red carpet treatment.

They were excited because finally someone, SOMEONE, was going to do something about the situation. You don't have to know much about the history of Israel around the time of Jesus to know it's not pretty. Ever since the people made it out of exile and back into the land, they had been occupied- first the Greeks, who were bad. After the Greeks came the Romans. The Romans made the Greeks look like choir boys. The Romans were so inventive. On the positive side the Romans invented things like concrete- and that was pretty good. But more typically, the Romans also invented crucifixion (or at least raised it to an art form), which was not only a way to get rid of people they didn't like, but when they set them up along the roads leading into and out of towns- they were like grisly billboards saying “If you want to keep this town weird, then Rome will make you pay.”

So the people were ecstatic because finally, FINALLY, a Messiah had shown up who was going to stand up to the Romans and clean house. Messiah is simply a Hebrew term for a king. And one of the few things the people could agree on was that God was going to raise up another Messiah, someone like David, who was going to save them from the Roman menace.

Now, it's true...that skinny kid didn't look like much. The sandals, the long hair, and riding on a donkey and a colt...not exactly Terminator material. But you know, sometimes people are tougher than they look.

Of course if they really had looked closely, they would have seen something even more disturbing, something even less in keeping with a mighty Messiah: he was crying. Luke says he was weeping, actually as he was riding in. Even as the crowd is going wild around him, Luke says that Jesus is looking out over Jerusalem, over this city, and he isn't pumping up the crowd, he isn't kissing babies, he isn't making great speeches about how it was morning in Israel again- he's crying as he rode in.

He weeps because he sees see the expectations of these people lining the roads, throwing down their branches and coats, and shouting out Hosanna in the highest, he could see the expectations they had for him, and he knew how far off the mark they really were.



Expectations. The Oxford English Dictionary defines an expectation as a preconceived idea of what will happen in the future. A preconceived idea about what will happen in the future. That crowd was there, cheering Jesus on, not because they were curious about him, not because they wanted to find out what he had actually come to do- they were cheering him on because

they KNEW what he would do. He was the Messiah. He would get rid of the Romans and fix all their problems. It was that simple.

And you know, I wonder how different we are. I wonder what kind of expectations, demands, really, we have for Jesus- or God. Have you ever wondered that? Have you ever wondered what it is you expect from God?

Sometimes it's good health. You think, hey, I go to church. I'm a good person. I should at least have good health. I should be able to expect that much, right? I don't know HOW many times I've heard someone say that a heart attack or stroke or car accident or death shouldn't have happened to this or that person, because, and I quote, "They were one of the good ones." We have this sense, even if we're not aware of it all the time, of how things should go- of how God is supposed to behave.

Maybe we expect God to make us feel less lonely, or that our life should seem more fulfilling, more meaningful. And if we believe, if we try to be good people- well, this should count for something, shouldn't it?

Or maybe our expectations aren't even about us- maybe they're about the people we love. Maybe we expect God to fix whatever's wrong with our family, our partner, our kids, or the people we work with- now THAT would be nice, right? Come on, God- a little help?

And so, Jesus weeps because this crowd that is so willing to shout his name into the sky on Palm Sunday will, in just a few day's name, call out for his crucifixion- because he will so badly fail to meet our expectations.



But here's what we all miss. We missed it back then, and we continue to miss it today. Jesus does not ride in on Palm Sunday to tell us what we want to hear. He doesn't come to meet our needs. He does not come to meet our expectations- our preconceived ideas about the future. He comes to be a savior. And what you and I need to be saved from most may be our own expectations- our own narrow, selfish, and lifeless expectations.



He starts immediately. The first thing on Jesus' list when he arrives in Jerusalem isn't the Roman garrison, it isn't leading a mob over Pontius Pilate's place to throw the bum out- the first place he goes is to the temple- to the good guys. And he tears the place apart. Now unfortunately, when we think of this event, we call it the Cleansing of the Temple, which makes it sound like it was a great thing that the people would have loved- like Spring Cleaning. But the Gospels NEVER refer to what Jesus is doing as cleansing. Never. An editor made that title up and stuck on top of the chapter giving us the false impression that this was a popular thing.

But it wasn't. See, the money changers are people who take your Roman coins which proclaim Caesar to be divine, and they give you a shekel in exchange, as a way of keeping the temple pure. It's a nice, pious kind of thing to do. It's like people today who take their hats off when they pray or enter a church. It's just a little something we do to show respect. But in Jesus' eyes all of this pious nonsense is meaningless when the poor were being allowed to go hungry, and justice was not being done in the gates. And so, to show his frustration and anger-

he does a little interior redecorating. And what he does when he turns over those tables is say to Jerusalem our worst problem isn't Rome- it's us.

And this is bad. We expect leaders to tell us our problems are someone else's fault. It's the Democrats addicted to spending. It's the Republicans giving tax cuts to millionaires. And our leaders, the ones we like, always promise to make those bad guys pay. But not Jesus. He says you know who needs to change? We do. Who needs to take responsibility? We do. We don't like this. This is not what we want or expect from him. But if this is bad, what he says later is worse.

In Luke's version of the story he says as bad as everything is, it's going to get a lot worse before it gets better. You see the stones of this temple, he says to anyone with ears, a day is coming and is already here when not one of them is going to be left standing. The whole place is coming down.

And if we didn't like him pointing the finger at us by turning over the tables in the temple, we really don't like this. We expect leaders to tell us things will get better- not worse. When we survive the next Presidential election cycle I can safely guarantee you two things: one is that you will be relieved when it is over; and two is that no one, not a single candidate will tell you that if you vote for them some things will still probably get worse, that there are no easy answers, and that all of us are probably going to have to work a little longer and expect a little less. Even though we all know this is the truth I can guarantee you no one will say it. And it isn't just because they're a bunch of cowards- it's because we don't want to hear it. We want them to tell us what we want to hear.



Jesus doesn't arrive on Palm Sunday to shine us on or fulfill our expectations. He comes bringing something better- he comes bearing God's hope for the world, God's dream for the world. And friends, although expectations and hope are both about the future- we confuse them at our peril.

Where expectation is rational, something that speaks to your brain; hope is intuited, felt, it sings to our hearts.

Expectations are about getting what we want- what we think we deserve; hope is about getting what we need- what we know we don't deserve at all, and will only see because of God's grace.

Expectations are about what we can achieve. They are as big as our willingness to work hard; hope is about what's probably laughable in the eyes of the world and will only come about with God's help.

Expectations are plans we craft during the day; hope is a dream that comes to us at night.



A friend of mine from seminary, Jim, has the good fortune of working in the town he loves, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with one of the greatest preachers in the world- Craig Barnes. Indeed, Craig is who I first heard make this distinction between expectations and hope.

Members from their congregation traveled to Israel two years ago. Today, so much is going on in the Middle East right now- so many surprising, unpredictable, and deeply hope-filled things. Their church actually had an inkling about some of this before it was on anyone else's mind.

They were so excited about the trip because they had scored some meetings with some really prominent officials in both the Israeli side and the Palestinian side. They were really excited to meet with these men, all men of course, and discover what was going on that really might offer signs of hope.

Well, these officials were fantastic. They were well dressed. Their English was impeccable. Everything was organized and well planned. It was exactly what you'd hope for on a church trip like this.

Well, everything except the conversations. The conversations with these leaders left them feeling so exhausted and hope-less. The leaders on both sides just kept on going on and on about how bad the other guys were. The Israelis said you couldn't expect THEM to open up the roads more and treat the Palestinians better when they were attacking them and bombing them. And the Palestinian leaders said you couldn't expect THEM to tell their people to stop the violence when Israel treated the Palestinians like animals. It was about all these expectations. And finally, after day after day of this, the group was just absolutely weary of it. The place just seemed barren of possibility.

Well, they had two more days to go. And the thing NO one was looking forward to was approaching- they had somehow made plans to stop in this out of the way village to worship with

some Palestinian Christians before flying back home. And the only group they wound up being able to make plans with was this little Roman Catholic community. Great- they thought. A bunch of American Presbyterians trying to worship with Palestinian Roman Catholics. That ought to be LOADS of fun. Shoot me in the face, as our former resident Nicole Reibe used to say.

Well, the first thing they discovered was how little these people had. The village was small, the homes were tiny and in bad repair. Many of the people they saw looked tired and hungry.

But the second thing they discovered was how rich these people were in love. This little church hosted all of these wealthy Presbyterians from this huge downtown church. And the hosts were unbelievable. One Presbyterian woman made an offhand comment about her host's bracelet. This Palestinian woman immediately removed it from her arm and handed it over. When the lady tried to give it back, her host would have nothing of it and left the room almost in a huff.

Two men who were staying with a family noted how surprised they were by their beds- how comfortable they slept. They later learned that the family had gone out the day before these men arrived and spent literally months of their savings to buy the absolute best mattresses they could find- far better than the ones the family themselves slept on.

And then came the worship itself. Craig said the priest to his utter surprise invited him to lead worship with him, even to preside at the table. He even gave Craig one of his vestments to wear. Now Craig's about 6'5'' and the robes made it just to his knees, looking like this terribly

ugly sundress. But he could not have been more proud to wear it. And then right before they served the priest told the entire congregation that everyone would be welcome to receive the Lord's supper that morning- everyone. If Craig had been surprised by the priest's hospitality up to this point, he was floored by this. If you don't know, in the Roman Catholic church communion is served only to Roman Catholics. Protestants and people of other faiths are expected to come with their arms crossed and may receive a blessing, but no more. Craig, fearing for the priest, immediately leaned over and whispered to the priest that he didn't have to do this- that they understood. What about Rome, he hissed? And the priest smiled the biggest smile you ever saw, he said. And with a sparkle in his eyes he said no law of Rome was greater than Christ's way of hospitality and his demand that we love one another. And besides he said, Rome long way away.

And so they all came forward. They all came. Palestinians. Americans. Men. Women. Roman Catholics. Presbyterians. Every time we serve communion we say that all will come- east and west and north and south- well they really did this. And in the most surprising way that none of them expected, hope blew through that room and entered into their hearts and brought them all back to life.



Friends, this holy week I pray that our expectations, these preconceived ideas about our future and what SHOULD happen, the ideas we have about what God should and should not do- well I pray these our expectations may be frustrated and even blocked. If only so that the door might be cracked open just wide enough for God's hope to be able to sneak in. **Amen.**